Introduction

The End of Beliefs—A Self-Destructive Prophecy

A few years ago I conducted some research into the decline of the belief in Father Christmas.[1] One of the objectives of the study was to clarify the process that leads children to abandon a belief to which, most often, the whole family seems to give credence. In almost one case out of two, the end of this belief was accompanied by a period of crisis in which the child was crying and suffering from seeing part of his system of representation under threat. Many of the accounts that have been collected make much of this psychological pain. To the question "what did you feel when your realised that Father Christmas does not exist?", one of those interviewed replied, "It was very hard. If there is no Father Christmas, then there is nothing magical at all. At that point I stopped believing in Father Christmas as well as in fairies and elves …"

The end of infant childhood is accompanied by a change in our representational system, the abandonment of a certain vision of the world. We must leave behind us a universe that is both terrifying and enchanted. The wardrobe monster disappears, but at the same time so does the fairy that can make all our wishes come true.

It is tempting to draw a parallel between the ontogenesis and the phylogenesis of belief. In the same way as children give up their beliefs, has not humanity also renounced a whole truckload of beliefs that

seem ridiculous to us now? Who still believes that certain stones have a mind with which we can communicate? Who believes that the universe ends beyond the ocean? Who would be ready to bet on the advent of collectivist societies and the dictatorship of the proletariat? Who still has blind faith in progress and thinks that science is wholly virtuous? Who believes nowadays that radioactivity can get rid of wrinkles? Who believes that the Earth is flat and that it is the Sun that revolves around it, rather than the opposite?

Of course there are some people who still believe in these things, but we accept that this type of belief does not properly characterise what we generally refer to as our contemporaneousness. However, other beliefs immediately spring to mind that we have no trouble in thinking of as equally strange and yet which remain somehow ineradicable, even novel, and which nonetheless seem to characterise contemporary societies, even including those which are the most industrialised: such as creationism, sectarian doctrines of all types, astrological and numerological beliefs, conspiracy theories, etc.

All of this is part of well-known paradox, but one that is nonetheless intriguing for sociology: that of the coexistence of progress in human knowledge with persistence of certain ideas that are either false or questionable.

The notion that such a situation is paradoxical is in fact one that is contaminated by a certain philosophy of history, as will be shown. It also derives from the fact that we all too readily accept a conception of human rationality that is overly restrictive.

It is true that the history of beliefs and of man are in one sense confused with each other. Some writers support the notion that the human being emerges in a real sense when he begins to believe and to imagine.[2] The sparse material evidence left by our distant ancestors seems to support the theory that theirs was a *society of beliefs*. Thus it would appear that very early in the history of humanity, our forebears believed in the existence of an afterlife. Prehistoric man, therefore, already had his own beliefs, or at least this is the argument put forward by Leroi-Gourhan (1990, p. 53), although he is very careful in how he deals with the question:

> *Voluntary, and where possible ritual burial has been the great battle-cry of those who are for or against Palaeolithic religion. It is certain that the burial of a corpse constitutes in itself a strong*

presumption in favour of ideas about the continuation of life beyond apparent death.

Beliefs do not only accompany the history of humanity, but constitute something specific to our species. It would be difficult to support the notion that animals believe in any meaningful sense, as Engel (1994, pp. 94–98) notes, distinguishing four characteristics of belief:

1. Beliefs are semantically assessable mental states that have intentional content. This means that individuals have a relationship of voluntary validation with some terms that can have meaning for other people. Which constitutes, as will be seen, a difference with the notion of representation.
2. Beliefs have powers of influence and a "functional profile". Belief is one of the factors that can lead an individual to take a decision, to chose one option rather than another. For example, "I believe that this team has a greater chance of winning and therefore I will bet on it."
3. The contents of beliefs are holistic, and this means that for a belief to have any determinate content, it is necessary for it to be related to other beliefs. A belief thus implies, in fact, a set of beliefs. For example, I believe that it will be fine tomorrow, and this means that I believe that tomorrow the sun will come out, and that I would have some predetermined beliefs about what could be meteorologically called a fine day, etc.
4. Beliefs are second order intentional states. This means that although the beliefs to which potentially we adhere are not all consciously present in our mind, which is fortunate, they could become so very easily if only we so desire. To take the previous example, the belief that it will be fine weather tomorrow implies at least one more belief, that the sun will rise tomorrow. This is not present in my mind when I utter the first belief, but it could easily become so if I begin to wonder about the matter.

Animal behaviour, even among the most evolved of the apes, is consequently never motivated by beliefs for it does not answer the requirements of criteria three and four of belief (points one and two could be, at the limit, more open to question).

There is little doubt that the destinies of man and belief have been linked up until now, but that does not mean that they will continue

into the future. Indeed, is the type of apprehension of reality that is *belief* more likely to disappear as it faces increasing competition from *knowledge*? For instance, because those beliefs concerning a life after death can only endure as long as we are ignorant about our post mortem destiny, the belief is in most cases linked to a lack of information. By the same token, the majority of societies have constructed what are termed cosmological myths, stories that describe the beginnings of the universe and the beings who people it and which answer the question, "where do we come from?", "how can we explain what is around us?" If the questions concerning the survival of the soul cannot be answered and thus allow free rein to all sorts of beliefs, those about the genesis of the universe are at least partially clarified by science and in particular by cosmology. By partially is meant that they are far from being able to deactivate all forms of beliefs, but they do at least discredit, for most Western people, the possibility of the material intervention of gigantic creatures that separated the heavens from the earth, as certain creation myths narrate. Those who continue to give some credence to the texts that support this type of thesis would generally emphasise that they are to be interpreted in a symbolic sense.

Thus the question is: will the progress of science and of knowledge in general be able to make such beliefs disappear?

This was a thesis that was once held and even considered desirable, in particular during the 19th and 20th centuries. It appeared indeed to some thinkers that the advance of reason would make it possible for a society to appear from which all forms of superstition would be exiled. Did not Paul Bert declare: "With science there will be no more superstitions or belief in miracles, no more coups d'état or revolutions". From the beginning of the Enlightenment, religion (which is only one particular form of belief) was considered by many writers—and in the first rank of these was Edward Gibbon and his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776/1845),—to be doomed to an early disappearance.

Many of the greatest minds of the 19th and 20th century (Comte, Frazer, Freud, etc.) conceived the history of humanity in ontogenetic terms, or in other words that it had experienced an infantile period before becoming at last in our time, an adult—a programme known in the social sciences under the name of evolutionism. Within this perspective Europe was the most advanced jewel in the crown of the history of humanity, whilst many peoples, the "primitives" studied by anthropologists, had remained in a condition of infancy.

Those who supported this thesis, amongst whom were included Edward Burnett Tylor, the first to occupy the chair of anthropology at Oxford (1896), and Lewis Henry Morgan in the United States, saw that the persistence of magical beliefs among these people was an inescapable argument in its favour. Lévy-Bruhl (1951, p. 20) even maintained with some success that there was a difference in social evolution between Western peoples and the "primitives", and that these latter did not even think in the same way as *us*. Whilst *we* were capable of rationality, this was not the case for those beings who were driven by pre-logical thinking: "it is thus necessary to give up the reduction of mental processes to a single type, whatever the society under consideration, and to explain all collective representations by a psychological and logical mechanism that is always the same." These conceptions were based on the remarkable progress of science that many thought was able to solve humanity's problems and to liberate it from the straitjacket of beliefs. Some, such as Freud (1981, pp. 226–227), even called for the dictatorship of reason: "Our best hope for the future is that the intellect—the scientific spirit, reason—should in time establish a dictatorship over the human mind." In some disciplines, it was even thought that the process of knowledge collection was almost at an end. It was just such an ambition for the historical sciences that Lord Acton confessed to in the first edition of the *Cambridge Modern History*. Even though he admitted that not all problems had been solved, he thought that this was only a temporary situation. By the appearance of the second edition of the work some 60 years later, as E.H. Carr points out, (1961, Fr. edn. 1988) it was thought that the work was endless, and that there was no "objective" historical truth.[3]

In physics, by the same token, the progress of scientific knowledge made some believe that the mysteries of the universe were in process of being definitively unveiled. Lord Kelvin, for instance, considered that the discipline was all but perfected but for the problems of "two clouds" hanging over physics: the failure of the Michelson-Morley experiment and black-body radiation.

The later development of science in general and of physics in particular would show the naivety of this type of viewpoint. This discipline was not the only one to experience a profound upheaval during the course of the 20th century, but it is certainly that in which internal revolutions were the most remarkable.

Amongst the three main lines of these extraordinary turbulences, two were the result of the minor problems referred to by Kelvin: the

first (black-body radiation) led to quantum mechanics, the second (the Michelson-Morley experiment) to special relativity theory.

Gleick (1991, p. 21) summarises in a formula the objectives of these three revolutions:

> *Relativity eliminated the Newtonian illusion of absolute space and time; quantum theory abolished the Newtonian dream of a process for verifiable measurement; and chaos, for its part, eliminated the Laplacian utopia of determinist predictability.*

If nowadays one were tempted to list the main questions of physics, as Lord Kelvin had done in his time, a very large number of areas of obscurity would be listed. This forms, *a priori*, a paradox: how can both knowledge and ignorance advance hand in hand?

Lord Kelvin's position, though it might appear naïve to us now, is not however *incomprehensible*, there is nothing surprising in it given the state of knowledge of physics of his time, for he would not have been able to take account of what was unknown, especially in the area of the infinitely small.

Such an example could readily be extended and shows how much the idea that the advancement of knowledge will automatically eliminate beliefs is in itself a belief.

This conviction is in fact supported by three implicit ideas whose fragility I will demonstrate in this book, and which will enable me to expose the main characteristics of collective beliefs in contemporary societies.

It is based above all on a certain philosophy of history, one that Karl Popper would have described as historicism. This philosophy of history, an inheritance from the Enlightenment and inspired by the writings of many authors, of whom Fontenelle and Condorcet were not the least illustrious, supports the idea that our individual mental development accompanies the development of what might metaphorically be called collective thinking. Writing in the 17th century, Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle in his *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* had argued for there being an analogy between the history of science and the mental development of the individual, and a century later Condorcet argued for a similar idea in 1794, in his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*.

This is a naïve analogy, on the one hand because it postulates that, in the same way for the development of the intellect, that of collective

ideas will follow the same direction. A simple examination of the contemporary market for ideas[4] shows us that it possible for there to be a simultaneous juxtaposition of scientific progress and advances of knowledge *and* the arborescence of ludicrous ideas, false beliefs and all sorts of cognitive products that are no less attractive than the truth, as we will see in the concluding chapter on "New characteristics of the cognitive market". Such an analogy is misleading moreover because it postulates that the development of common knowledge is the development of the knowledge of everybody. This is the sort of fallacious argument that Mill (1988), had already identified and that Pareto (1968) also referred to (the former by describing it as the *fallacy of composition* or *division*, the latter by using the term in relation to the *fallacy of distribution*). I will show the falsity of this idea in chapter 4, "When the whole is less than the sum of the parts of which it is composed: common and individual knowledge". Here again, the characteristics of the contemporary cognitive market can readily account for the fact that however much scientific knowledge develops, it must suffer the unfair competition of ideas that are false but very seductive.

This brings me to denounce the second idea which supports belief in the end of collective beliefs, an idea as old as the idea that philosophy spontaneously opposes reason and belief. Indeed it is possible to go back to the first inquiries on this point by the pre-Socratic philosophers and in particular to Parmenides for whom belief, or opinion (which are here synonymous) or *doxa* (appearance) is opposed to the truth and to being itself, for it is the negative of "the unshakable heart of well-rounded truth" (*Fragments*, I, 29, Brun, 1989). It is not surprising to discover that Plato did not have a contrary conception to that of Parmenides in his categorical opposition between belief and knowledge. This notion leads on to treating all manifestations of belief—especially in its most ludicrous forms—as the expression of irrationality, from causes that are unconscious, psychoanalytic, social, or biological … that constantly lay siege to our minds. I will make a counter-argument to this received idea by showing that reason, as it is constituted in man, allows and is in fact the precondition *sine qua non* of the appearance of belief. In chapter 3, "How can reason lead us to the irrational?" I will show how it is that the best trained minds are not always those who are most resistant to the attractions of the authority and influence of beliefs.

Finally, the myth of the end of beliefs is implicitly based on a metaphor, that of communicating vessels, which suggests that everything

gained by knowledge is lost to belief, and vice-versa. The intermixing of relations between knowledge and belief are much more subtle as I will show when looking at science in chapter 1, "Advance in science and technology does not always impede the development of the strangest beliefs." Far from reducing to nothing the empire of beliefs, science can on the contrary fertilise it, help it to be transformed, provide it with new arguments, and even, quite simply, authorise the emergence of new beliefs.

These different perspectives will help us to understand why our contemporary societies are characterised at one and the same time by remarkable progress in science and technology, and a no less remarkable continuity of all sorts of beliefs.

To conclude this introduction I would like to say this: the three ideas that underpin the theory of the decline of beliefs are linked to an implicitly optimistic and progressivistic representation of the history of human thought. The fact that this view of things may have some sympathetic aspects does not mean that it is thus automatically rendered true. This fantasy representation of history and of the psychological characteristics of man may be considered a reformulation of one of the most remarkable beliefs of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is inspired by a Promethean imagination, and has widely spread to such a point as to become in one or other of its three aspects a sort of *doxa*. Even the statement of this belief constitutes a flagrant denial of the thesis that it defends. For this reason it can be understood as a suicidal or self-denying prophecy, to borrow Merton's term. As is well-known, this American sociologist had described, (following Popper who had earlier referred to an "Oedipus effect") how certain beliefs have the tendency to become true by the simple fact that they are stated and then believed. Merton (1965, p. 140) gives one example among many, his parable about the rumour that hit a fictional *Last National Bank* belonging to a Cartwright Millingville in 1932. This bank was until that point prosperous, but a rumour of insolvency spread among its customers that despite its considerable cash reserves, the bank would not be able to meet all demands for withdrawal. Once the rumour had spread, a large number of customers decided to withdraw their savings as a precaution. As a result the bank became insolvent. It had experienced its last week, brought down by a self-fulfilling prophecy. In a symmetrical manner, although without developing this idea to any extent, he had also thought that there were suicidal or self-denying prophecies.

It is a phenomenon of this type that reveals the belief that collective beliefs will disappear. This point brings to mind the thesis defended by Géhin in his book *La société: un monde incertain*, where he recalls the fact that during the 1960s, some American writers such as Edward Shils, Daniel Bell, Seymour Lipset and Talcott Parsons had thought that it would be possible to predict the "end of political ideologies" in Western democracies. These writers, who continued the line of thought that was inspired by macrosociological models that conceived of societies as machines or organisms (such as Saint Simon or Spencer), thought that political questions were ones that could be made technical problems and thus be stripped of all their passion and ideological finery. As Gain explains, (2006, p. 123): for them "political ideology is (or was) an intellectual archaism linked to social archaisms that were in process of disappearing". But this conception of things is in itself ideological and constitutes as soon as it is expressed the very negation of the idea that it puts forward because it demonstrates that the commentators on the end of political ideologies are themselves contaminated by a certain view of society and of history that is no less ideological. Géhin notes that the uncertainty inherent in the management of all human issues automatically brings political power to the fore, even in those societies described as outdated or archaic. Social life inevitably generates more or less explicit belief systems that account for collective action, for the ends being sought, and for the feeling of group belonging; in other words, an ideology.

In the same manner I will show, in the chapters that follow, that the mental invariants of the human species and the very characteristics of our contemporaneity bring together all the conditions in which collective beliefs can thrive, including those which affirm that they will soon disappear.

NOTES

1. Cf, Bronner (2004).
2. This is notably one of the ideas that Morin championed (1973).
3. On this question see Revel (2001).
4. I will define this term more precisely in chapter 5, "The cognitive market and the persistence of beliefs", and for the moment I will make it clear that the cognitive markets belong to a family of social phenomena (that economic markets also belong to) where individual interactions converge towards (non-refined) emergent and stable forms of social life. It is a market because it is where what can be called cognitive products are exchanged: hypotheses, beliefs, knowledge, etc. which may be in a state of competition, monopoly or oligopoly.